

ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

Majority (202) 225-5051
Minority (202) 225-5074

May 20, 2009

Lynne Osmus
Acting Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Administrator Osmus:

As Ranking Member of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, the House's main investigative committee with broad oversight jurisdiction, I am writing to request information related to your approval of \$800,000 in stimulus funds to repave an alternate runway at the John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport ("John Murtha Airport").¹ Your decision represents an egregious waste of taxpayer money and violates President Obama's commitment to ensure that public funds are expended responsibly.²

As recent news reports illustrate, the John Murtha Airport is a black hole for taxpayer money. The airport, which ABC News found "virtually deserted" and called the "Airport for Nobody," serves just 20 passengers each day spread over three flights – all to Washington Dulles International Airport.³ Yet the airport has received \$200 million in federal funding over the past decade and continues to receive a subsidy for every flight, costing taxpayers \$1.4 million, or \$147 per passenger, last year alone.⁴ In addition, previous congressional earmarks have brought the airport an \$8 million state-of-the-art radar system that has never been used and a \$6.5 million three-story National Guard and

¹ See Carol Leonnig, "FAA Approves Plan to Give Stimulus Funds to Airport Named After Murtha," *The Washington Post*, May 12, 2009.

² See President Barack Obama, Memorandum, "Ensuring Responsible Spending of Recovery Act Funds," March 20, 2009. Available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Memorandum-for-the-Heads-of-Executive-Departments-and-Agencies-3-20-09/.

³ See Jonathan Karl, "Welcome to the Airport for Nobody," *ABC News*, April 23, 2009. Available at <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/Politics/story?id=7412160>.

⁴ See Carol Leonnig, "Murtha's Earmarks Keep Airport Aloft," *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2009.

Reserve training center, which the *Washington Post* reports resembles a “rustic ski lodge.”⁵

Your decision is most troubling in light of the fact that the John Murtha Airport obtained a \$17.8 million earmark in 2006 to replace a 7,000-foot-long asphalt runway with a “reinforced concrete bed”⁶ that enables the airport to “land any airplane in North America.”⁷ Yet, after reviewing these reports, you decided to spend \$800,000 in taxpayer money to repave a *second* runway. Perhaps this was just in case two of the three planes that land at the airport each day want to land at the exact same time. The \$800,000 wasted on this project may represent a pittance to an Administration comfortable with enacting a \$787 billion stimulus program and proposing a \$3.5 trillion federal budget. However, to Americans struggling through today’s challenging economic environment, \$800,000 represents real money that shouldn’t be wasted in order to please well-connected politicians.

News reports indicate that your decision to direct \$800,000 of stimulus funds for the second runway comes on the heels of pressure from one Member of Congress to allocate additional money to the airport. After the airport lost some federal funding last year due to declining passenger traffic, the *Washington Post* reports that Rep. John Murtha contacted your office in December requesting additional funding.⁸ While the FAA declined to change its rules, your recent decision to allocate the stimulus funds restores the airport’s funding close to its previous level.⁹ This decision appears to contradict the President’s commitment to “not allow Recovery Act funds to be distributed ... in response to improper influence or pressure.”¹⁰

Back in March, Vice President Biden said that “Six months from now, if the verdict on this effort is that we’ve wasted the money, we built things that were unnecessary or we’ve done things that are legal but make no sense, then, folks, don’t look for any help from the federal government for a long while.”¹¹ The American people have a right to know why \$800,000 of their money is being spent to repave a second runway at an airport that hardly anyone uses. This project is clearly both unnecessary and senseless.

President Obama has stressed the need to “make sure that every single dollar [of stimulus funding] is well spent,” and committed that if wasteful spending is found, “We will call it out and we will publicize it” and “put a stop to it.”¹² In addition, President Obama committed to spending stimulus funds on only those projects that have a

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ See note 3, *supra*.

⁸ See note 4, *supra*.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ See note 2, *supra*.

¹¹ See “Obama to states: Spend stimulus wisely,” *Associated Press*, March 12, 2009. Available at

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29653584/>.

¹² *Id.*

demonstrated ability to “deliver programmatic results, achieve economic stimulus by optimizing economic activity and the number of jobs created or saved in relation to the Federal dollars obligated, achieve long-term public benefits, ... and satisfy the Recovery Act’s transparency and accountability objectives.”¹³ It is clear that this project fails to achieve any of these objectives and represents a failure to live up to the President’s promise to the American people.

This is a great opportunity to put a stop to wasteful spending. I encourage you to reconsider your decision and do everything in your power to immediately halt any further expenditures of taxpayer money on the John Murtha Airport project.

In order to assist the Committee with its investigation of this issue, please provide the following information by close of business on Tuesday, June 2, 2009:

1. A full and complete explanation of your decision to allocate \$800,000 of stimulus funds to the John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport to repave the airport’s alternate runway (the “airport project”).
2. All records and communications referring or relating to your decision to allocate \$800,000 of stimulus funds to the airport project.
3. All records and communications between FAA officials and Members of Congress, state representatives, or other public officials referring or relating to the allocation of stimulus funds to the airport project.
4. A full and complete explanation of the “merit-based selection criteria” you used to guide your decision-making process as to the decision to allocate \$800,000 of stimulus funds to the airport project.¹⁴
5. A full and complete explanation of how the airport project will “deliver programmatic results.”¹⁵
6. A full and complete explanation of how the airport project will “achieve economic stimulus by optimizing economic activity and the number of jobs created or saved in relation to the Federal dollars obligated.”¹⁶

¹³ See note 2, *supra*.

¹⁴ See President Obama’s directive to all executive departments and agencies to “develop transparent, merit-based selection criteria that will guide their available discretion in committing, obligating, or expending funds under the Recovery Act for grants and other forms of Federal financial assistance. Referenced in note 2, *supra*.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

7. A full and complete explanation of how the airport project will “achieve long-term public benefits.”¹⁷
8. All records and communications referring or relating to any individuals who are lobbyists or who work for lobbying firms, law firms, associations, corporations, unions, interest groups, or other non-federal organizations that corresponded (through phone calls, email, faxes, letters, memoranda, or other correspondence) or met with you or other officials in the Federal Aviation Administration about the prospect of any stimulus funds being allocated to the John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport.

Please note that, for purposes of responding to this request, the terms “records,” “communications,” and “referring or relating” should be interpreted consistently with the attached Definitions of Terms.

Thank you for your cooperation in this matter. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Senior Counsel Christopher Hixon or Professional Staff Member Brien Beattie of the Committee staff at (202) 225-5074.

Sincerely,



Darrell E. Issa
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable Edolphus Towns, Chairman
cc: The Honorable Peter Orszag, Director, Office of Management and Budget
cc: The Honorable Earl Devaney, Chairman, Recovery Act Transparency and Accountability Board

Attachment

¹⁷ *Id.*

Definition of Terms

1. The term "record" means any written, recorded, or graphic matter of any nature whatsoever, regardless of how recorded, and whether original or copy, including, but not limited to, the following: memoranda, reports, expense reports, books, manuals, instructions, financial reports, working papers, records notes, letters, notices, confirmations, telegrams, receipts, appraisals, pamphlets, magazines, newspapers, prospectuses, interoffice and intra office communications, electronic mail (e-mail), contracts, cables, notations of any type of conversation, telephone call, meeting or other communication, bulletins, printed matter, computer printouts, teletypes, invoices, transcripts, diaries, analyses, returns, summaries, minutes, bills, accounts, estimates, projections, comparisons, messages, correspondence, press releases, circulars, financial statements, reviews, opinions, offers, studies and investigations, questionnaires and surveys, and work sheets (and all drafts, preliminary versions, alterations, modifications, revisions, changes, and amendments of any of the foregoing, as well as any attachments or appendices thereto), and graphic or oral records or representations of any kind (including without limitation, photographs, charts, graphs, microfiche, microfilm, videotape, recordings and motion pictures), and electronic, mechanical, and electric records or representations of any kind (including, without limitation, tapes, cassettes, disks, and recordings) and other written, printed, typed, or other graphic or recorded matter of any kind or nature, however produced or reproduced, and whether preserved in writing, film, tape, disk, videotape or otherwise. A record bearing any notation not a part of the original text is to be considered a separate record. A draft or non-identical copy is a separate record within the meaning of this term.
2. The term "communication" means each manner or means of disclosure or exchange of information, regardless of means utilized, whether oral, electronic, by document or otherwise, and whether face-to-face, in a meeting, by telephone, mail, telexes, discussions, releases, personal delivery, or otherwise.
3. The terms "referring or relating," with respect to any given subject, means anything that constitutes, contains, embodies, reflects, identifies, states, refers to, deals with or is in any manner whatsoever pertinent to that subject.